Scotland's hidden powers?

Ewen A. Cameron

Scotland's Hidden Powers? Politics and the Union in an Uncertain Age

Summary

This essay begins with some thoughts from Hugh MacDiarmid and proceeds to discuss Scotland's place in the Union state that is the United Kingdom, emphasising the centrality of Scotland to the Union. In discussions of British history Scotland tends to have a walk-on part at times of crisis, such as the present moment but its place in the Union is more fundamental. The essay attempts to make this point through historical contextualisation of recent political shifts.

In 1926 the nationalist poet and controversialist 'Hugh MacDiarmid' concluded his poem, 'Gairmscoile', about the potential of a revived Scots' vernacular with the lines:

> We ha'e faith in Scotland's hidden poo'ers/ The present's theirs but a' the past and future's oors. (Grieve and Aitken, 1985, i, 75)

The keepers of the present subjected here and elsewhere to MacDiarmid's extraordinary invective were not so much contemporary politicians but those 'who posed as men o' letters here' and had, as MacDiarmid saw it, regressive attitudes to the Scots language, in which MacDiarmid saw huge creative possibilities. (Lyall, 2006, 94–5) The quotation is, nevertheless, freighted with political possibilities as MacDiarmid conceived of cultural and political renaissance as part of the same project. He was a member of the National Party of Scotland, one of the predecessors of the SNP, which was founded in 1934 (Finlay, 1994, 71–125). In fact, he was expelled from the SNP in May 1933 due to his extremist views and his association with Communism (Bold, 331–2). In a letter to the novelist Neil M. Gunn, a much more pragmatic nationalist, MacDiarmid derided the founder of the SNP, John MacCormick, as a 'nitwit'.[1] MacCormick had been the key figure in the transformation of the National Party to make it suitable for merger with the more right-wing Scottish party, founded in 1932, to create the SNP, which he hoped would be stronger vehicle for political nationalism than the smaller groups that it aimed to supersede. This moment induced a sense of pessimism and negativity in MacDiarmid:

[1] Letter to Neil M. Gunn, 19 May 1933, in Alan Bold (ed.), *The Letters of Hugh MacDiarmid* (London, 1984), p. 250

> There is nae ither country ‘neath the sun/That’s betrayed the human spirit as Scotland’s done. (Grieve and Aitken, 1985, ii, 1273)

He had retreated to the island of Whalsay in Shetland, where he would remain for most of the rest of the decade. MacCormick left the SNP in 1942, frustrated at its lack of electoral success and its opposition to his strategy of trying to build alliances with other parties, especially the Liberals, to achieve independence (Petrie, 2017). At this point the leader of the SNP was a MacDiarmid ally, Douglas Young (Pentland, 2017), who invited him back into the fold, an invitation warmly accepted by the poet.[2] To return to 1926, also the year in which he also published his remarkable long poem ‘The Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle’, MacDiarmid felt that those who sought to maintain the cultural, and by implication, political *status quo* were on insecure ground: ‘The auld volcanoes rummle ‘neath their feet, And a’ their shoddy lives ‘ll soon be drush, …’ (Grieve and Aitken, 1985, i, 75,).

The current moment in Scottish and British politics is profoundly different from that of the 1920s and 1930s but it seems that MacDiarmid’s concerns and his lines are apposite for thinking about the political conditions in which we find ourselves. The past, present and future of Scotland are in a more contested state than they have been, perhaps at any point since the Union of 1707 or the Jacobite rebellion of 1745–6. The implications of Scottish politics are also perceived to be more widely relevant than they have been since that period. In 1996 the distinguished British historian John Stevenson argued that there had been few Scottish events that ‘mattered vitally to the history of mainland Britain during the last hundred years or so.’ (Stevenson, 1997). This was a deeply problematic statement at the time but if we accept its mistaken assumptions for a moment, it would seem that current events around the referendum on Scottish independence, the referendum on the UK’s membership of the European Union and the general elections of 2015 and 2017 would meet the test of Scottish events of sufficient importance to affect the narrative of British history. Scotland’s ‘hidden poo’ers’ are becoming increasingly evident and the ‘auld volcanoes are ‘rumbling’ in a very profound way ‘neath the feet’ of the leaders of the principal British political parties.

[2] Letter to Douglas Young, no date but c. June 1943, *Letters*, p. 601

Another key aspect of the current moment in British politics is that, contrary to the circumstances of the referendum of 2014, where the momentum for anti-unionist politics came from Scotland, the most likely routes to the end of the union begin in Westminster. Indeed, despite the fact that the Conservative government that took office in July 2019 has made loud rhetorical commitment to the Union, its actions and approach to the politics of the Union are profoundly threatening to that long-standing political structure. Even within the Conservative party a deep divergence of opinion is emerging. During Theresa May's premiership, Ruth Davidson, leader of the Conservatives in Scotland, was seen as one of the most successful Conservative politicians in the country, largely as a result of the successful performance of the party at the 2017 general election. Despite the fact that she was not an MP, she was talked about as a future leader of the party. When Boris Johnson became Prime Minister in July 2019, arguing for the possibility of a no-deal Brexit and proceeding to sack Davidson's close friend, David Mundell, from his position as Secretary of State for Scotland, she amplified her long-standing criticisms of his approach. A poll for the website Conservative Home, however, recorded her net approval rating as only +14, the lowest of all the politicians in the poll, compared to +77.2 for the new Prime Minister and similarly high ratings for his close allies.[3]

There is a widespread assumption that the current dispensation is a positive one for the SNP. Indeed, in early August 2019 an opinion poll commissioned by the Conservative peer Lord Ashcroft showed, by some interpretations, a small majority of Scottish voters favouring independence.[4] The SNP are in a strong position in the Scottish parliament, although they no longer have the majority of the period from 2011 to 2016, and would have no fears of a UK general election, despite the fact that they lost 21 seats at the 2017 election. The most recent national election, the 2019 European election, albeit fought under a single-transferable-vote system, produced a good result for the SNP and, perhaps more importantly, a terrible result for Labour in Scotland. While the SNP gained nearly 600,000 votes (a 37.8 per cent share) and three MEPs, Labour gained only 147,000 votes (a 9.3 per cent share) and failed to win any seats, coming in 5th place in Scotland, only just ahead of the Green Party. Although the idea of Scotland as a Labour fiefdom is quite a recent phenomenon, this recent decline is

[3] https://www.conservativehome.com/thetorydiary/2019/08/javid-johnson-and-rees-mogg-take-the-podium-in-our-latest-cabinet-league-table.html)

[4] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-49243355

remarkable. Labour was the main beneficiary of the Conservative unpopularity in the 1980s and 1990s, peaking at the 1997 UK general election with 1.2 million votes, a 45.6 per cent share of the vote, and 56 of the then 72 Scottish seats. This was a level of Labour voting last seen in 1964, the last of the essentially two-party elections of the twentieth century. The decline since then has been partly due to the rise of three- and four-party politics but in very recent times there have been additional dimensions to Labour weakness in Scotland. In 2015 Labour gave way in the face of the SNP juggernaut as that party took a remarkable 56 of the 59 Scottish seats in the aftermath of the 2014 referendum. Labour's trysting with the wider unionist coalition, especially the perceived association with the Conservatives, cost it dearly as working-class 'Yes' voters, a very large group, became more favourably inclined to the SNP, of which there had formerly been much suspicion (Fieldhouse and Prosser, 2018, 11–25). In 2017, which saw an apparent swing back to two-party politics at a British level, the Labour party in Scotland did not profit from the bounce associated with the energetic and populist campaign fought, much against expectation, by Jeremy Corbyn. Although the party gained 6 seats and nearly 3 per cent of the vote in Scotland to take it to a 27 per cent share, this paled into insignificance compared, in Britain as a whole, to the 30 seats gained and 9.6 per cent gain to take Labour to a 40 per cent share of the vote.[5] Many of the populist claims made by Labour in England and Wales, for example on tuition fees for university students, were irrelevant in Scotland, where the SNP positioned itself as more progressive than Labour. In addition, Jeremy Corbyn's brief moment of popularity stopped at the border: an essentially metropolitan politician, he had little feel for the subtleties of Scottish politics and no clear understanding of how to respond to the SNP (Prosser, 2018, 1226–36).

In July 2019 the SNP were quick to attempt to capitalise on the new Prime Minister's unpopularity in Scotland by publishing a statement enumerating the reasons for Scottish voters to take a negative view of Boris Johnson and arguing that his approach strengthened the case for Scottish independence.[6] There are some difficulties in the current position, however. The 2014 referendum was arranged in a spirit of cooperation between the UK and Scottish government, the former being very confident of victory (Torrance, 2013, 1–32). At the present moment, leading members of the UK government have declared unconditional opposition to Scottish independence so an arranged referendum is clearly not likely to take

[5] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2017/results/scotland

[6] https://www.snp.org/boris-johnson-what-you-need-to-know-about-the-new-tory-pm/

place.[7] The options for the SNP include holding an unofficial referendum or using a UK general election to secure a mandate for independence. Both are, however, very risky strategies and their presence in the debate exemplifies the completely uncharted nature of the political waters in the summer of 2019.

An additional feature of the political landscape in Scotland is the recovery of the Liberal Democrats, both north and south of the Border. In the same week that Johnson was elected as the new leader of the Conservative party, the Liberal Democrats elected Jo Swinson, a Scot and MP for a Scottish constituency, as their new leader. The party, the inheritors of the strong Scottish Liberal tradition, have found the going very difficult since they entered a coalition government with the Conservatives in 2010. Indeed, Jo Swinson was a minister in that government. At the 2015 and 2017 general elections they performed very badly. At the latter election, although they gained three seats from the SNP, they won only 6.8 per cent of the vote and their 179,000 votes were the fewest they had gained at an election in Scotland since 1970. This decline came after a very strong showing in 2010 when, under the leadership of another Scot, Charles Kennedy, they gained over 500,000 votes in Scotland and eleven Scottish seats. This performance came in the aftermath of the party and its leadership taking an unambiguous stance against the Iraq war. Current conditions are, however, propitious. The party is clearly positioned as an anti-Brexit force (their slogan in the European elections was 'Bollocks to Brexit'!) and they have a long history as the most pro-European of all the Scottish political parties. In addition, as political memories shorten, their participation in the 2010–15 coalition is no longer such an electoral liability as it was in the last two UK general elections.

The final point about the current context of Scottish politics that has to be considered is, of course, Brexit. At first sight this is uncomplicated. Scotland voted 62 per cent in favour of remaining in the European Union and there were, in Edinburgh (74.4 per cent), for example, some remarkably high votes in favour of Remain.[8] This reflected a significant shift in Scottish political attitudes to the European project. Such a shift was especially noticeable since the late 1980s and was a marked change since the 1975 referendum on the UK's membership of the European Economic Community in 1975. In that vote, Scotland had been

[7] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2017/results/scotland

[8] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/eu_referendum/results

one of the areas of the UK least enthusiastic about membership of the EEC, recording a vote in favour of membership of 58 percent compared to 69 per cent in England. In 1975, the SNP had been one of the loudest voices against continued membership of the EEC. (Saunders, 2018, 345–64) Since the late 1980s the SNP has swung round in favour of membership of the EEC and, indeed, the idea of independence in Europe became one of the key elements of its political strategy (Sillars, 1989; Macartney, 1990, 35–48). As the European institutions increasingly came to engage with sub-national actors, an opportunity was presented to Scotland and this became even more important after devolution in 1999. (Mitchell, 1995, 287–98; Sloat, 2000, 92–110) This was very important during the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence when European politicians and others argued that an independent Scotland ought not to assume that it would be able to continue as a member of the European Union. This was seen as a key argument against Scottish independence and elicited a furious response from the SNP.[9]

In considering the mode and direction of travel that has brought us to the present moment, as discussed above, we need to be careful to avoid a series of traps. The avoidance of these traps requires an excursion into the political history of post-union Scotland and this will be the theme of the next section of this paper. The first potential trap is that we must not construct a new narrative of modern Scottish and British history that emphasises a linear progression, a whiggish version of history that begins with the current moment and reinterprets earlier events as giving inevitable rise to it. The other potential trap is to assume a polarity between the status quo and the independence, between Unionism and Nationalism. Both are shifting positions and often do not possess the qualities that their advocates and opponents ascribe to them. Further, there is a fundamental point about the Union that is often forgotten It is, fundamentally, a partnership in which Scotland and England participate. It is not a unitary state but a Union state. Over its history since 1707 many arrangements have been entered into to help accommodate Scotland, of which devolution is only the most recent, but that basic point remains. The Union would not just be diminished by Scottish independence but, essentially, dissolved. In this point of view everything that happens north of the border ‘matters vitally’ to the history of the UK.

[9] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-26215963

The first requirement in trying to understand the historical context of the current position is to think further and more historically about Scotland's place within the United Kingdom. This is based on the Regal Union of 1603 and the Union of 1707, the latter includes Acts of both the Scottish Parliament and the Westminster Parliament and a Treaty between Scotland and England (Whatley, 2014, 30–78). This is not the place to rehearse the debate on the 'causes' of the union but a range of considerations – including trade, access for Scotland to the Empire, securing of the protestant succession, foreign-policy considerations for England in a period of war with France and finding a way of compensating Scottish elites for their losses in the failed Scottish imperial adventures of the 1690s – were all involved in its construction (Whatley, 1989). Although the phrase 'incorporating union' is sometimes used, it was, in reality, an accommodating union. In this it was very different from the British-Irish union of 1800 (Jackson, 2012, 88–114). Although Scotland's representation at Westminster was relatively small – 45 MPs and 16 representative peers – the position of the presbyterian Church of Scotland, the legal system with its civil and criminal courts, and the education system (including the five Scottish Universities extant in 1707) were all guaranteed by the union. Further aspects were protection of important Scottish industries, such as salt and coal (Whatley, 1987). This meant that the union enshrined a strong degree of Scottish autonomy and institutional identity within the new state. This inclusivity is an important reason for the survival of the Union into its fourth century. Scotland's powers were embedded, if not exactly concealed, within the Union.

For most of its history, the Union has been a settled feature of Scottish life. British and Scottish elites have adopted different tactics to ensure its survival but the basic strategy was the same for most of the period since 1707: recognition of the relative autonomy of Scotland within the union. In the eighteenth century, Whig political managers, especially the 2nd duke of Argyll, his brother the earl of Islay and later Lord Fletcher of Milton, managed Scottish interests and dispensed patronage.(Murdoch, 1980). In the nineteenth century, Scottish elites used the Kirk, the education system and the power available through the extraordinary concentration of landownership to ensure that power was effectively devolved to the localities. From the mid-eighteenth century onwards Scottish cities became increasingly important centres of power, especially Glasgow, which liked to think of itself as the 'Second city of the Empire'. This concentration of political power in urban Scotland and the existence of a strong civil society in Scottish cities, especially Edinburgh, is at the core of an argument that characterises Scottish identity in the nineteenth century as 'unionist-nationalism'

(Morton, 1999). This has been used to resolve the apparent conundrum that a nationalist movement did not develop in Scotland in the classic period of romantic nationalist movements in Europe: there was no need for one because the state was not seen as a particularly important actor in society and the Union of 1707 provided for the autonomy of Scotland within the structures of the Union (Paterson, 1994).

These channels of government were formalised in the nineteenth century with the creation of a more robust system of local government as the Kirk fragmented and was no longer such an effective vehicle of secular administration in areas such as education and social welfare. The 'Disruption' of the Church of Scotland in 1843 was a seminal event in Scottish history in the nineteenth century. Evangelicals within the Church became ascendant during the 1830s and early 1840s and sought to assert the spiritual independence of the Church over the state. The main issue over which this was played out was the controversy over 'patronage', the system in which landowners, local authorities and the Crown had powers to appoint clergymen without any necessary reference to the people who attended, or were communicants of, the Church. Because the Kirk was so important in the administration of social welfare and education this dispute had more than purely ecclesiastical consequences (Brown and Fry, 1993). A new Poor Law was established in 1845 and the state took over responsibility for most of the school system in 1872. Nevertheless, within these new systems the localities remained strong. Most decisions on questions of social welfare were taken by local 'Parochial Boards' and, in the case of education, local 'School Boards' were elected. Despite the fact that some of these bodies were elected on quite wide franchises, some of them including women, Scotland in the nineteenth century remained a society governed by a narrow elite. This was especially true in the period before the extension of the franchise in 1832, 1868 and 1885 and, perhaps especially the creation of County Councils in 1888. Prior to this date Scottish local government in the counties was carried out by Commissioners of Supply, most of them landowners. Most of the services were funded through local rates, taxes on property; therefore, the landowners, who owned a very high proportion of the tax base, had a powerful incentive to keep the levels of taxation low.[10]

[10] The system is described in a Cabinet paper that can be found at NRS, GD40/16/6/6–9, Memorandum as to Local Government in Scotland, 18 Nov. 1886.

The governance of Scotland was altered in two important ways in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 1885, the office of Secretary for Scotland was established, in the words of Lord Salisbury, the Prime Minister, 'to redress the wounded dignities of the Scotch people'.[11] This began a period of administrative devolution that saw the growth of the Scottish Office as an important territorial ministry (Hanham, 1965). It became an important symbol of the union, especially from its reorganisation in the 1930s and the opening, in 1939, of St Andrews House as a tangible marker of the union and the relative autonomy of Scotland within it (Mitchell, 1989). The Scottish Office grew to administer most areas of domestic policy in Scotland – health, education, agriculture and fisheries, justice, the particular problems of the Highlands. One major exception was Higher Education, the universities were the only area of the Scottish education system not to be administered by the Scottish Office.

The funding arrangements for Scotland within the United Kingdom have been a matter of controversy since the late nineteenth century. In 1888 when the establishment of Scottish county councils was being contemplated, a system was required to allocate financial support for their activities. Since the money was to come from a UK-wide fund, receipts from Probate duty, G.J. Goschen, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, decided to allocate the money on the basis of each country's contribution to that and other exchequer funds, Scotland's was 13.75 per cent, or 11/80ths, of that of England and Wales. This method of allocating money became known after the Great War as the 'Goschen formula' and survived into the 1950s, possibly later, its application spreading despite its datedness.[12] The formula was not applied comprehensively across the board of public expenditure and should not be thought of as the means of general allocation of Scotland's share of public expenditure, it was most often deployed in education spending (Mitchell, 2003, 149–81, 236–40). The question of national contributions to and receipts from the Exchequer was a controversial item in the 1880s because of the debate on Irish home rule and nationalist complaints that Ireland was contributing more than she was receiving; similar claims were made by advocates of Scottish home rule, although in a lower key. A Royal Commission investigated the issues but its conclusions were not definitive because the political context was so heated. Another

[11] West Sussex County Record Office, Goodwood Mss, 871/D46, Salisbury to Richmond and Gordon, 13 Aug. 1885.

[12] NLS, Woodburn MSS, Acc. 7656/16/2, W.G. Pottinger to Woodburn, 13 Aug. 1957; NRS, ED26/1323, contains material from 1969–71 about the formula

investigation was carried out in the 1950s by the Catto Committee and the question was raised again in 1978. It was recognised that a new arrangement was required to find the size of the block and to make marginal changes to Scottish expenditure. This led to the Treasury undertaking an assessment of Scotland's public expenditure needs and coming up with another formula, designed to be temporary, based on population shares, which identified Scotland's share of any changes to public expenditure in England at 10/85^{ths}. This became known as the 'Barnett Formula', after Chief Secretary to the Treasury Joel Barnett. This also survived longer than intended and has been altered from time to time (McCrone, 1999, 34–7)

The ministerial occupants of the Scottish Office – Liberal, Labour and Conservative – often regarded themselves as Scotland's advocate in the Cabinet, rather than the Cabinet's advocate in Scotland. Thomas Johnston during the Second World War was probably the best example of the former approach (Walker, 1988). One of his Labour successors, Arthur Woodburn, who held the office from 1947 to 1949, possibly the best example of the latter strategy (Pentland, 2017b). This was a source of frustration to even the most powerful of Prime Ministers. In her memoirs Mrs Thatcher was bitterly critical of George Younger and Malcolm Rifkind for 'going native' and being captured by the St Andrews House elite who, although members of a single UK Civil Service, were distanced from Whitehall (Thatcher, 1993, 620). The continued existence of a vibrant Scottish press, radio and tv journalism and later electronic media, gave a different gallery for the Scottish Office ministers to play to. So, from the 1880s to the 1990s, Scotland's powers were located to a considerable degree in the Scottish Office during this period of administrative devolution.

It was the existence of the Scottish Office that made it possible to implement devolution in 1999 as the Scottish Executive, later self-styled 'Government', took responsibility for most areas of domestic policy, now including Higher Education after the reforms of the 1990s. This is an important, although underplayed, element in the debate over Scottish independence. The long tradition of administrative and parliamentary devolution means that many of the governmental structures of an independent state are already in existence and the officials who staff this structure have intimate knowledge and long experience of the government of Scotland, albeit within the United Kingdom.

So much for government structures, what can be said about political culture? How do we explain the way in which Scottish politics diverged to the extent that we now see. Current

media comment on Scottish politics is fascinated by the recent rise of the SNP and the precipitous decline of the Labour party in Scotland. As recently as the general election of 2010, a point between two very strong SNP performances at Scottish parliament elections, the Labour party did well in Scotland at a Westminster election: they took 41 seats with over a million votes and a 42 per cent share.[13] They were, however, almost wiped out in 2015, retaining only one seat, and although they made six gains in 2017 this was overshadowed by a much better performance from the Conservatives, who made 12 gains, albeit with a share of the vote only a little higher than Labour's (28.6 per cent compared to 27.1 per cent).[14] These recent changes, important though they are, elide some of the subtleties of Scottish politics that are evident if we take a longer view.

In the period from 1832 to 1910 there was only one election, that of 1900, at which the Liberals did not win a majority of Scottish seats. Although Labour, which performed poorly in Scotland before 1914, began to do better in Scotland in the 1920s, there was a powerful Unionist bloc. It is worth making a point about political language in that from 1912 to 1965 the word 'Conservative' did not appear in the formal Scottish political lexicon. When, in 1912, the Liberal Unionists (ie those Liberals who had opposed Irish home rule in the period since 1886) merged with the Conservatives the result in Scotland was the Scottish Unionist Party (Burness, 2003). This was a party that was powerful in the post-war years, gaining 50.1 per cent of the Scottish vote at the general election of 1955, admittedly in an age of two-party domination (Cameron, 2010, 271–77). For much of their history the Union that the Unionists were defending was not that of 1707, which was not thought to be under threat, but that with Ireland of 1800 and later the partition arrangement of 1922. Labour, of course, was also deeply unionist, what might be called 'lower-case unionism'. This can be seen in its very unimaginative responses to nationalists' campaigns in the 1940s and 1950s.[15] This element of Labour's identity was exemplified by Willie Ross, a deeply patriotic Scot who served as Secretary of State for Scotland from 1964 to 1970 and again from 1974 to 1976. He was very sensitive to any perceived slight to Scotland and its place as an equal partner in the Union but he was implacably opposed to the SNP and all its works and had very little truck with ideas

[13] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/election2010/results/region/7.stm

[14] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2017/results/scotland

[15] TNA, PREM8/1517, Scottish demands for home rule or devolution, memorandum by the Secretary of State for Scotland, 6 Dec. 1947.

of devolution, as they were discussed in the Labour government in the late 1960s (Tanner, 2006).[16] This discussion was driven by Richard Crossman, who saw the response to Hamilton as being more than a 'Scottish or Welsh problem but as a problem of regionalism and decentralisation, which could affect England'.[17] Ross described the office of Secretary of State for Scotland as a very difficult one but that its main role was to be the 'Voice of Scotland'. In this, he argued, Scotland benefited to a greater degree than as a result of the 'chauvinistic urgings' of the SNP' (Ross, 1978, 13–14). In this period the nationalist parties were performing well in both Scotland and Wales but nothing prepared the Labour party for the cataclysm that struck when Winifred Ewing won a by-election at Hamilton, one of the safest Labour seats in Scotland (Mitchell, 2017). This put Scottish politics on the map and led to intensive introspection in the government and, to surprised metropolitan journalists, a discovery that Scottish politics were more significant than they had thought, as far as they did think about Scottish politics (Beloff, 1968). This led to a knee-jerk reaction from the Conservatives who suddenly declared themselves in favour of a form of home rule for Scotland, Edward Heath's so-called Declaration of Perth (Pentland, 2015). Episodes like this, and the devolution crisis of the 1970s, apparently bring Scottish matters to the surface, they seem to uncover Scotland's hidden powers. This, however, is deceptive. If the union is inherent to the UK state then Scotland is omnipresent and important not only when it intrudes on an English narrative, as was the case in 1967/8, 1974–9 or during the crisis of the 'poll tax' in the late 1980s.

The deep unionist consensus in Scottish politics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is important in reaching an understanding of the current political circumstances. From the middle of the nineteenth century there have been a variety of movements seeking to refine the position of Scotland within the Union but the idea of independence for Scotland is a relatively recent and profoundly unsettling arrival on the Scottish political scene. Even within the history of the SNP it took some time for the party to settle on independence as the firm and unambiguous objective. In the nineteenth century organisations like the National Association for the Vindication of Scottish Rights, active in the 1850s, and the Scottish Home Rule Association, founded in 1886, argued for the better governance of Scotland within the

[16] TNA, CAB164/393, Economic Planning towards Scotland, W. Ross to PM, 23 Feb 1967, GOVERNMENT POLICY AND SCOTLAND

[17] NLS, Woodburn MSS, Acc. 7656/1/1, Crossman to Woodburn, 10 Nov. 1967.

union.[18] The Young Scots Society, established by radical Liberals in the aftermath of the disastrous election of 1900, kept the idea of Scottish home rule alive in the Edwardian period. The Irish issue was crucial to the place of Scottish home rule on the political agenda. Irish home rule had divided the Liberal party when it was proposed by Gladstone in 1886. This division led to the birth of Unionism as an explicit political force, with the creation of the Liberal Unionist party, which merged with the Conservatives in 1912, a time of another proposal to create a home-rule parliament in Ireland. Home rulers in this period argued for 'home-rule all round': parliaments for Ireland, Scotland, Wales and the English regions, and federal solutions to the constitutional problems of the UK, rather than the asymmetrical devolution that was proposed in the 1970s or granted in the late 1990s.

For much of its history, with the exception of the period from 1974 to 1979, the SNP has been a marginal political force in Scotland. Devolution from 1999 has proved to be a boon for the SNP, providing them with a context in which they can fight elections on their own terms, with a clear emphasis on Scottish issues, and keep the constitutional issue alive, much to the frustration of the unionist parties. Without devolution there would have been no independence referendum in 2014, which is not the same as saying that the latter was the inevitable consequence of the former. The referendum campaign of 2014 was notable in a variety of ways but principally for the result, which, although a defeat for the Yes campaign, saw a record high vote for independence. Opinion polls have consistently shown between a quarter and a third of Scottish voters favouring independence so pushing this level of support up to 48 per cent was a major achievement for the SNP and its allies in the Yes campaign.

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Most historical accounts of Scottish devolution and the roots of the independence referendum give great agency to the Mrs Thatcher, or, rather, the deep unpopularity of her governments in the 1980s. Perhaps a more helpful way to look at the problem is to perceive a deep failure of unionist politics and a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the Union and Scotland's place in it. Perhaps David Cameron, in his handling of the SNP in the run-up to

[18] TNA, James Ramsay MacDonald Mss, PRO 30/69/1188, Minute Book of the London SHRA (of which MacDonald was the Secretary)

the referendum of 2014, proved to one of the more adroit Unionists of recent years.[19] In the immediate aftermath of the referendum, however, he was less sure footed. On the morning after the Scottish independence referendum, in a speech made outside Number Ten Downing Street, he referred to the idea of 'English votes for English Laws'.[20] He suggested that this was now the moment for the English voice to be heard, to complement the Scottish voice that had been amplified in the referendum. This was the latest in series of attempts to uncover England's powers within a UK characterised by devolution. Notions of democratic deficits were central to the reheating of demands for Scottish devolution in the 1980s, drawing on the idea that Scotland's political choices were being ignored by the Conservative government of that period. Some of the same language is current in the contemporary discussion of England's position in the UK. As recently as 2004, in a Parliamentary debate about the West Lothian question, the proposed solutions to the English anomaly rarely included the idea of an English parliament, or even English regional assemblies, although there was a referendum on an assembly for the North East of England in 2004. The proposition was defeated by 77 per cent to 23 per cent and plans for further referendums for other English regions were abandoned (Rallings and Thrasher, 2006). The essential problem with these approaches is that it is very difficult to distinguish between English and British issues. This much had been clear to Winston Churchill in 1911 when he examined the matter in the midst of preparations for a putative home-rule-all round scheme that was to complement the third Irish Home Rule Bill (Jalland, 1979).[21] Alternative solutions, in 2004, were changes to the Committee system of the House of Commons (an old favourite), the enforcing of a convention that Scottish and Welsh (Northern Ireland devolution was in abeyance at that moment) observe a self-denying

[19] A point made to me recently by a senior figure in the SNP government who thought that Cameron was one of the few UK politicians in recent years who 'got' the nature of devolution.

[20] https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/sep/19/david-cameron-devolution-revolution-uk-scotland-vote

[21] TNA, CAB37/105/16, Devolution, 24 Feb. 1911 [Winston S. Churchill]; CAB37/105/18, Devolution, 1 Mar. 1911 [Churchill]; CAB37/105/23, Devolution, 9 Mar. 1911 [Courtenay Peregrine Ilbert].

ordinance on voting on 'English' measures and the 'certification' by the Speaker of Bills that were 'English' (extremely difficult to do).[22]

Unionism at the heights of its success was able to present itself as almost a form of nationalism and certainly displayed a nuanced understanding of the nature of the Union and Scotland's place in it. Indeed, as early as 1910 the Unionist Party issued a confidential memorandum to its candidates reminding them of the importance of 'Scottish National sentiment' and that appeals to such should not be monopolised by the 'Radical Party' (i.e. the Liberals).[23] Later, the Scottish Unionist Party was able to present itself as the defender of Scotland as Labour nationalised and centralised in the 1950s and 1960s.[24] It was the Unionists who strengthened administrative devolution in the 1950s and early 1960s with the addition of ministers to the Scottish Office and its reorganisation in 1962 with the creation of the Scottish Home and Health Department and the new Scottish Development Department (the Scottish Economic Planning Department was also added by a Conservative government in 1973). In no sense were they seen as an anti-Scottish party, an accusation that was thrown against them in the 1980s. After they were wiped out in Scottish seats in the UK general election of 1997, they have, ironically, only survived as a presence in Scottish politics through the Additional Member electoral system of the Scottish parliament, both of which they opposed but to which they have now come to terms.

Labour's difficulties with the union have been different but equally profound. Despite drawing on radical traditions that include Scottish home rule, the party became from the 1930s very centralist and deeply unionist (Knox and McKinlay, 1995). Their unionism was of a less subtle variety than that of the Unionists. This was particularly evident in the 1974–9 period, when even a weak devolution scheme caused serious divisions in the party and was sunk in a complex but ill-fated referendum in March 1979 (Cameron, 2010, 296–319). Pro-home rule Labour politicians were thin on the ground – the MP for North Berwick and East

[22] House of Commons Debates, 21 Jan 2004, vol. 416, cols 1389–443; virtually the only MP to argue for an English parliament (cols 1404–5) was the maverick Conservative Eric Forth (a Scot who sat for an English constituency.

[23] The memorandum can be found in the Andrew Bonar Law Mss in the Parliamentary Archives at BL32/3/30.

[24] NLS, Tweedsmuir Mss, Acc. 11884/3/56, Nationalisation.

Lothian, John P. Mackintosh, was a remarkable exception but his tragically early death in 1978 silenced a very distinctive voice. As well as his parliamentary career he had a distinguished academic record, culminating in his appointment to the Chair of Politics at the University of Edinburgh. His academic writing focused on the history the Cabinet and a 'Penguin Special' on devolution (Mackintosh, 1968; Walker, 2013). Donald Dewar, who died in 2000 while in office as the first First Minister of Scotland was another strong pro-devolution voice from the 1960s, he was first elected for Aberdeen South in 1966 (a seat that he lost in 1970). He returned to Parliament for Glasgow Garscadden in a famous by election in 1978 that was widely seen to have ended the ascendancy of the SNP in that period.[25] John Smith is often held up as the archetypal Labour pro-devolution voice, which he certainly was during his leadership of the party from 1992 to 1994, when he argued that devolution was the 'settled will of the Scottish people'. In reality, he was a relatively late convert but a very important one as he was the Minister of State in the Cabinet Office in the Callaghan government who did most of the work piloting the Scotland Bill through the House of Commons in 1977–8 (Stuart, 2005, 74–94). These men were the exceptions. As the difficult experience of legislating for devolution in the period 1974–9 shows, the Labour party, from the Cabinet down, was extremely suspicious of the idea and saw it merely as a strategy for appeasement of the SNP, which had done very well indeed in the general elections of February and October 1974, winning eleven seats in the latter and coming second in over forty others, almost precipitating the kind of breakthrough that occurred in 2015. The Labour party in Scotland was extremely concerned that they were on the cusp of losing control of Scottish politics, problematic in itself but, more importantly, fatal to their chances of forming a UK government.[26] In the event, when they returned to power in 1997 they did so with a majority so large that the 56 Scottish seats that they won on that occasion were not crucial to the parliamentary arithmetic.

Even in the 1980s as Labour increasingly dominated Scottish politics and the unpopularity of the Conservatives deepened, their commitment to devolution strengthened but the arguments that they used were not very logical for a unionist party. The idea that the Conservatives did not have a 'mandate' to govern Scotland as their Scottish MPs were in a minority is,

[25] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/1027304.stm

[26] NLS, J.P. MacKintosh Mss, Dep 323/143, The Political and Economic Situation in Scotland: A background memorandum, 21 November 1975.

essentially, a Nationalist argument. New Labour delivered a Scottish Parliament in 1999 and, in many ways, the system has worked well and delivered better governance to Scotland. It did not, however, as George Robertson predicted, 'kill the SNP stone dead'. It provided a platform for that party to complete its move from the margins of Scottish politics to the centre, and maybe to a pivotal role in the formation of a UK government as the main UK parties struggle to form majority governments. If this is the case, Scotland's powers will no longer be hidden but will be more obvious than at any point since 1707. This was used as a tactic to damage the Labour party at the General Election of 2015. The Conservatives argued that Labour would seek to govern through arrangements with the SNP or Sinn Fein. They used highly effective posters showing the Labour leader, Ed Miliband, as a diminished figure, literally in the pocket of Alex Salmond, who returned to the Commons in that election.[27] This was an interesting moment in terms of the theme of this essay, as it seemed to suggest that UK political parties appreciated the likely effect of a strong SNP vote in the election and the potential importance of a large cohort of SNP MPs. The scale of the SNP victory in Scotland was certainly not anticipated but neither was the Conservative majority and, in the event, the SNP were not relevant to the formation of the government.

During the referendum campaign there was a strong leavening of unionism in the SNP's position. Alex Salmond – a very pragmatic politician on the question of independence – would certainly have been satisfied with enhanced devolution and talked of a social union that would have retained the pound sterling, the monarchy and other elements of Britishness and the UK state. That moment, along with Alex Salmond, has passed from the political stage. The Brexit referendum has changed the nature of the debate about Scotland's position in the United Kingdom. What was striking about the run-up to the 2014 referendum is the way in which there was accord between the UK and Scottish governments about the process. The referendum was arranged through consensus and with the necessary (as the constitution is a matter reserved to the UK government in the Scotland Act of 1998) cooperation of the UK government. That route does not seem open at the moment as rhetoric has hardened on both sides of the border, especially since the advent of Boris Johnson as Prime Minister of the UK since July 2019. His self-designation as 'Minister for the Union' (perhaps echoing

[27] https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/mar/09/tory-election-poster-ed-miliband-pocket-snp-alex-salmond

Churchill's self designation as 'Minister for Defence') demonstrates a fundamental failure to understand his position as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.

To return to Hugh MacDiarmid, with whom we began, the volcanoes of Scottish politics are very active indeed. Scotland's once hidden powers are becoming increasingly evident. The contests over Scotland's present can only be understood with reference to Scotland's past. The battle over Scotland's future is a live one and the implications will not stop at the Tweed or the Solway.

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